

Testimony of
Adolfo A. Franco
Assistant Administrator
Bureau for Latin America and the Caribbean
United States Agency for International Development
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Introduction

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee, I am pleased to have the opportunity to discuss USAID's disaster assistance in the Central American and the Caribbean regions. USAID has played an important role in providing humanitarian, reconstruction, and disaster preparation and mitigation assistance to these regions. Over the past several years, these regions have experienced a number of natural disasters including hurricanes, floods, and earthquakes. USAID, along with other USG organizations, has been able to assist these regions by providing both relief and reconstruction assistance. Today, I would like to share with you USAID's experience with assisting hurricane affected countries over the past several years, as well as the lessons we have learned which will better prepare our own country for the 2006 hurricane season.

Background

Hurricanes Mitch and Georges

In September and October 1998, two hurricanes – Georges and Mitch – successively battered the Caribbean and Central America, leaving more than 19,000 dead or missing, displacing over 3 million people and causing more than \$8.5 billion in damage. The Dominican Republic bore the brunt of Georges -- though en route the hurricane had pounded Puerto Rico and the Eastern Caribbean Island, and continued on to wreak havoc in Haiti, Cuba, and the Bahamas.

Hurricane Mitch, the deadliest and most devastating Atlantic hurricane since 1780, struck Central America, producing more than six inches of rain in less than a week, mostly over Honduras. The heavy rainfall caused flooding and landslides that killed thousands of people; left tens of thousands homeless; and devastated infrastructure, agriculture, and local economies.

In the first few days after the hurricanes, USAID, the U.S. Department of Agriculture, and the U.S. military provided a massive emergency response. In just a few months, more than \$300 million in emergency assistance was delivered. In Central America, the distribution of relief often relied on helicopters to reach mountain communities isolated by wrecked and impassable roads and bridges. The United States set an unprecedented goal of completing its massive \$621 million reconstruction effort in just 30 months. USAID also coordinated \$96 million of programming with 12 other U.S. Government agencies, many with no recent experience working with USAID-sponsored programs in Latin America. Over 3 million people in stricken areas benefited directly from U.S. reconstruction assistance, and millions more received indirect benefits.

Caribbean Hurricanes

In 2004 a series of Hurricanes — Charles, Frances, Ivan and Jeanne — swept through the Caribbean region. Hurricane Ivan, with winds reaching 145 miles per hour, first struck Grenada on September 7, 2004, causing roughly \$831.5 million in damage. On September 10-11, 2004, Hurricane Ivan continued its path of destruction setting down on the island of Jamaica. The heavy rains and strong winds caused significant human suffering and economic losses. About 14 percent of the total population, or nearly 370,000 persons, were directly affected, and economic losses were

significant. On September 17-18, 2004, yet another storm developed in the Caribbean, — Tropical Storm Jeanne — which struck Haiti. The heavy rains ravaged the northwest section of Haiti creating massive flash floods that claimed the lives of nearly 3,000 people and affected an estimated 300,000 through the loss of homes, schools, health posts, crops, and livelihoods.

The United States responded quickly by providing emergency relief. In October 2004, Congress passed a supplemental appropriation of \$100 million for additional hurricane reconstruction activities in the Caribbean. USAID led the U.S. funded assistance, which was given primarily to the three Caribbean nations that were the most badly damaged by the hurricanes: Grenada (\$42 million), Haiti (\$38 million), and Jamaica (\$18 million). Additionally, \$2 million was programmed for other affected islands in the Caribbean.

USAID assistance to Jamaica and Grenada focused on restoring people's livelihoods, addressing shelter needs, repairing damaged schools, and business recovery, while reducing Jamaica and Grenada's vulnerability to natural disasters in the future. In Haiti, USAID assisted affected communities by rebuilding their physical infrastructure and livelihoods, as well as working with communities to decrease their vulnerability to future floods.

Hurricane Stan

Last year, an unprecedented 13 hurricanes successively battered countries in the Caribbean Basin. Five of those — including Hurricane Stan — were particularly deadly, devastating parts of Mexico, Central America, and several Caribbean islands. By November 2005, more than 800 people had lost their lives and a half million individuals had been displaced. The region sustained more than a billion dollars in damages, affecting homes, clinics, and schools. Livelihoods were severely interrupted as the storms created major setbacks in agriculture and transportation systems.

On October 4, Hurricane Stan made landfall in Mexico and generated separate tropical storms across southern Mexico and Central America. Stan spawned torrential rains that lasted over five days, causing widespread and severe flooding and deadly mudslides. USAID and other U. S. Government organizations responded quickly with assistance to affected countries.

USAID provided over \$2 million for emergency and reconstruction activities in Mexico and El Salvador. In Guatemala, the hardest hit country, USAID provided some \$9.3 million in emergency assistance in the immediate aftermath of Hurricane Stan. The Agency also reprogrammed \$1 million in food aid that was already in country and provided another \$4 million to the World Food Program for additional food assistance. As a result, over 500,000 victims in Stan-affected Guatemalan communities benefited from food assistance. OFDA grants for NGO partners totaling \$3 million provided emergency health services, water and sanitation, and shelter to families in affected communities.

Lessons Learned

Central America and the Caribbean regions are in the hurricane belt and severe storms and hurricanes will be the norm and not the exception. USAID is building upon its lessons learned in previous hurricane programs to help mitigate the impact of future hurricanes, as well as to facilitate rapid and efficient hurricane relief and reconstruction assistance. USAID's Hurricane Mitch experience revealed the importance of having administrative, programmatic, and financial mechanisms in place that would allow USAID to expeditiously design and initiate large-scale infrastructure and rehabilitation programs, while at the same time providing emergency relief and initial reconstruction assistance. It also revealed the importance of working with both public and private sector groups in response to natural disasters. USAID's Caribbean hurricane experience emphasized speed, self-help, and "building back better" to support people in their efforts to quickly recover, rebuild, and resume their path to sustainable development.

Building back better became the mantra in the Mitch and Georges Hurricane Reconstruction program, when the United States as well as international partners agreed on an approach that would not simply replace what was destroyed but would build it back using techniques and standards that would make the structure better able to withstand damage. This approach was also used in the Caribbean Hurricane reconstruction programs. In Jamaica and Grenada, USAID repaired schools to their pre-Ivan condition or better in compliance with building codes and hurricane resistance standards. In Haiti, USAID provided grants to households to undertake their own repairs and provided technical assistance and training to introduce better construction techniques restoration grants as well as created a cash-for-work program to help those to decrease their vulnerability to future floods.

The need for flexibility in development strategies and implementation instruments resulted in USAID including a “Crisis Modifier” clause enabled the Agency to quickly reprogram funds in this emergency situation. In response to the hurricanes, this approach enabled USAID to provide immediate assistance to address priority sectors in priority geographic areas by reprogramming a total of \$10.5 million for Jamaica and Grenada and \$11.8 million for Haiti. As a result, USAID was able to quickly launch initial reconstruction activities that melded seamlessly with the implementation of the one-year Caribbean Hurricane Reconstruction program when it came on stream in December. This action was especially important in Grenada where there was no USAID mission. In Jamaica, this was also important, as there was no existing relationship with the Ministry of Agriculture and no existing construction-related activities.

Taking advantage of working with organizations that already had a history and presence in the disaster areas was key in moving forward quickly. In Haiti, USAID was able to start up Haiti’s Tropical Storm Jeanne Recovery program by working with selected non-government organizations and contractors that had a history of both working in the country and the affected areas, successfully implementing large-scale programs. This helped to strengthen coordination and ensured implementation of program activities, which was particularly critical given the security challenges in Haiti.

USAID also recognizes the importance of involving community based organizations in program implementation from its experience with Hurricane Georges. In Haiti, USAID worked with a local civil society organization, which was one of the few functioning groups in Gonaives, immediately after the flooding. The civil society organization became USAID’s program partner and liaison on community issues, security, and sustainable maintenance efforts. The use of community-based organizations provided a means to mobilize the local population rapidly to execute short-term employment generation activities such as drainage canal cleanup, tertiary road repair, and the building of protection structures to prevent ravine erosion. In Jamaica, non-government organizations played a significant role in the USAID-funded job training and housing repair programs, thereby allowing assistance to be provided more effectively at the grassroots level.

Working with the private sector produced benefits when USAID encouraged their participation in the Hurricane Stan recovery and reconstruction efforts, especially in Guatemala. In January 2005, USAID had started a multi-

million-dollar activity to fund public-private alliances to greatly increase access to basic health, nutrition, and education services in Guatemala. Established in January 2005, Alianzas represents a USAID commitment of \$9 million dollars that is leveraging a contribution of more than \$12 million from the private sector. By the time Stan swept into Guatemala, Alianzas was already well positioned to help coordinate a quick and impressive response by the private sector and the Guatemalan government for storm-ravaged communities. USAID authorized Alianzas to reprogram \$1 million dollars in its portfolio to disaster relief for projects focused on clean water, rehabilitation of wells, and disease prevention and management. U.S. corporations and private donors have contributed another \$2 million.

Sufficient USAID staff with the right skills mix to implement reconstruction programs was another important lesson USAID addressed. This was particularly challenging in Grenada because USAID does not have a mission in that country. In order to get the hurricane reconstruction program under way quickly, a private U.S. firm was hired to provide a full range of management oversight and monitoring support. The structure created by the Mission was highly flexible and could respond very quickly to changing needs throughout the program. In addition to serving an essential function of project oversight and day- to-day interaction with the Government of Grenada, the contracted firm also managed \$8 million of support directly for the Government of Grenada. This included staffing a new Grenadian Agency for Reconstruction and Development with both short-term and long-term technical experts, program and financial advisors, and managing an accounting firm to assist with the management of reimbursements of the Government of Grenada utilities. Although there were challenges with using this approach, it allowed USAID to quickly and successfully implement a hurricane reconstruction program.

Strengthening the capacity of countries to respond to disasters is an important component in hurricane belt regions. In Guatemala, the National Coordinator for Disaster Response (CONRED), which is the equivalent of our FEMA, managed that country's Hurricane Stan relief response. CONRED's ability to respond effectively was greatly enhanced by OFDA, which for several years has strengthened the capability of CONRED and local relief institutions to respond to a disaster of this magnitude by planning and carrying out seminars and training courses in disaster response and mitigation, as well as by coordinating nationwide emergency drills. After Mitch a new Emergency Command Center had been built that included state

of the art technology and was staffed by disaster relief experts representing social and infrastructure sectors and Government of Guatemala security forces. This continued USAID assistance to CONRED has enabled the organization to effectively respond to the current emergency conditions in areas affected by heavy June rains that have washed out sections of major roads that lead to Guatemala's ports.

Preparations for the Next Hurricane Season

In Jamaica and Grenada, USAID's approach of "building back better" has resulted in structures that incorporate hurricane resistant building standards. More importantly, as a result of USAID's hurricane reconstruction work, there has been an increase in community level education in Grenada and Jamaica on hurricane risk reduction methods to protect homes and businesses from catastrophic loss. Also in Jamaica, USAID worked with an NGO partner to develop a disaster mitigation quick-response plan for fisher folk, addressing safety-at-sea procedures, identification of safe harbors and protection of equipment in order to minimize losses.

In Haiti, heavy rains in the Gonaïves area during the passage of Tropical Storm Alpha last October tested the disaster mitigation groups formed under the USAID reconstruction project. Flooding was minimal as they successfully utilized what they had learned in cleaning out storm drains and implementing disaster plans. Building on this, USAID has provided a grant to UNDP to develop a national system for disaster risk and response management with the Haitian Directorate for Civil Protection. Departmental and local response committees are in place and have been equipped and trained. A trained disaster assessment team was recently successfully deployed to assess the recent floods in Port-de-Paix. In addition, the national public information structure is being revised based on lessons learned, and mechanisms for relaying information in the field are being expanded. UNDP is also working with the USG, through the USGS, to install a flood early warning system in Fonds Verettes, with a monitoring system at the local, national, and international level, along with training of Haitian staff.

In the Eastern Caribbean, USAID worked with the Organization for Eastern Caribbean States (OECS) to identify low cost but doable landslide mitigation approaches in St. Lucia, Dominica, and St. Vincent such as the installation of low cost drainage, roof guttering, and management of slope

stability in communities. This was accompanied by distribution of public awareness materials. In Grenada and St. Lucia, USAID has supported an OECS-led public education and training activity to support the promotion and enforcement of hurricane resistant housing construction standards in Grenada and St. Lucia. USAID has also provided assistance to expand an on-going OECS community-based mapping and mitigation activity in Dominica, Antigua/Barbuda, and St. Kitts/Nevis. These pilot activities seek to mobilize community groups to implement mitigation measures based on their hazard maps.

USAID has worked to promote a regional risk reduction policy agenda in the Caribbean by ensuring that risk reduction was included on the agenda of a variety of Caribbean forums and meetings. The objective was to use the lessons learned from various country activities to provide a foundation for a dialogue with policy makers and identification of priority policy action items. To that end, USAID has supported two full time risk reduction specialists to assist the OECS in establishing the dialogue and formulating the agenda; held a workshop in Jamaica on risk reduction and disaster preparedness for regional partners; participated in a regional risk reduction insurance meeting held in Dominican Republic; documented successful working models in smaller islands of “doable” actions that a small island government can put in place to reduce their risk from natural disasters; and undertaken a lessons-learned study of Grenada to identify key risk reduction approaches that worked, did not work, or could have worked to reduce Grenada’s losses from Hurricane Ivan.

In addition, USAID has prepared for the 2006 Hurricane season by incorporating disaster mitigation activities as an integral part of its sustainable development programming. For example, since Mexico’s steep terrain is prone to landslides and floods during the seasonal rains, USAID is helping Mexico to improve the management of rural areas and conservation of natural vegetation in many of the vulnerable areas of Mexico, including along the coast of Chiapas. In Haiti, environmental degradation is a root cause of the flooding that occurs after heavy rains. USAID’s Hillside Agriculture Program teaches farmers erosion control techniques such as building erosion control structures to stabilize the soil and best practices in natural resource management. In addition, through USAID’s Food for Peace activities, farmers are learning to manage watersheds, build soil-retaining structures, and plant and protect trees in order to restore the environment and prevent flooding. Additionally, OFDA manages a Regional

Disaster Assistance Program which provides risk reduction training throughout the year to local disaster agencies in program countries in Latin America and the Caribbean.

Conclusion

While Caribbean and Central America countries located in the hurricane belt cannot prevent hurricanes, they can decrease the negative impact these hurricanes can have within their countries. USAID continues to work with these countries to raise public awareness of effective disaster risk reduction approaches designed to reduce the loss of lives and catastrophic damage.

Mr. Chairman, this concludes my remarks. I welcome any questions that you or Subcommittee Members may have.

